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SUBJECT: RECONCEPTUALIZING TURKEY-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS

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Classified By: DCM Doug Silliman, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: The stiff blowback Turkey has received from Azerbaijan over the normalization of relations with Armenia has annoyed many Turks even as official Ankara remains, for the most part, eager to mend relations with Baku. No matter what the final outcome of the Turkey-Armenia process, however, Turkey-Azerbaijan relations will be changed by this crisis -- but not necessarily for the worse. If the rather hollow slogan of "one nation, two states" can give way to genuine, self-interested partnership and real coordination on regional political and security affairs, Nagorno-Karabakh, energy, trade and investment, and, ideally, institution building, civil society, democracy and human rights, then Turkey may prove effective in its stated objective to promote the stability, development and Euro-Atlantic integration of the South Caucasus region -- a capacity that would be even further enhanced by the normalization of Turkey-Armenia relations. END SUMMARY.

TENSION SUBSIDES;

TURKS EAGER TO MOVE ON...

¶12. (C) Tension between Ankara and Baku -- and the pressure the GOT has been under from the Turkish political opposition -- has subsided since Turkey and Armenia issued their joint statement with Switzerland on the "road map" to normalizing bilateral relations April 22, although the GOT continues to be criticized for failing to consult and to be questioned on the linkages between the opening of the border with Armenia and resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K) conflict. (NOTE: There have been contradictions between Turkey's public and private messages on this subject. END NOTE.) For its part, the GOT has maintained that Azerbaijan was and continues to be consulted in detail on the process of normalization with Armenia, which is a "parallel" or "mutually reinforcing" process to resolving N-K, and is continuing those consultations. President Gul met with Azerbaijani President Aliyev in Prague May 7; Azerbaijani Deputy FM Azimov was new FM Davutoglu's first official visitor in Ankara May 4, and Davutoglu accompanied Gul to Prague; new Energy Minister Yildiz also accompanied Gul to Prague and dispatched a BOTAS delegation to Baku almost immediately upon becoming Minister; and PM Erdogan is visiting Azerbaijan May 12-13, accompanied by Davutoglu, where he will address Parliament.

...BUT ATTACKS STRUCK A NERVE

¶13. (C) While it is difficult to discern the true extent to

which Azerbaijan's protestations have annoyed the GOT (in contrast to GOAJ officials, GOT officials are normally very reluctant to criticize GOAJ officials, publicly or privately), the sharp criticism from Azerbaijanis and the impression that Turkish foreign policy was being dictated by a foreign (albeit "brotherly") nation did not sit well here. At a Justice and Development Party (AKP) parliamentary group meeting April 22, Erdogan rebuked a group of visiting Azerbaijani MPs that had criticized his government. "My words are also for those who come from Azerbaijan and follow misguided policies here. We have never let down our Azerbaijani brothers before. Azerbaijani politicians visited the opposition parties but left AKP off their agenda," he complained. Erdogan sharpened his tone on April 26 at a meeting with AKP provincial chairmen where he said, "We follow the elements of animosity we see coming here from Azerbaijan. They stir up the situation with wrong information and lies. There are some (Turkish opposition MPs) going there from here. They try to stir up the situation. Through our six year-long government we have regarded policies about Azerbaijan as national policies. We do not accept such slander. We will not allow such a game with our national values." He alluded again to a "misinformation" campaign in an interview with the state TRT network May 9.

¶4. (SBU) CNN Turk on April 23 reported that Ankara was "furious" with Azerbaijan for manipulating public opinion in Turkey. The network reported that the Turkish public had started questioning the sincerity of Azerbaijan-Turkey brotherhood and to question why Azerbaijan was not providing

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solid support to Turkey on Cyprus. Media speculation that Azerbaijan would increase the price of natural gas to Turkey confused many Turks and was reported as a provocation. While most leading columnists have underscored the importance to Turkey of not losing Azerbaijan and pursuing the normalization with Armenia in concert with the resolution of N-K, others reacted negatively to the criticism from Azerbaijan. Cengiz Candar, in liberal "Radikal" April 22, called the Azerbaijani pressure "unfair." Taha Kivanc, in pro-government, Islamist "Yeni Safak," accused the GOAJ of having done "everything to move the Azerbaijanis against Turkey." "They want Aliyev to shake hands with Putin and agree on a new Moscow-Baku entente. They whispered false stories that (then) FM Babacan showed Azerbaijani Deputy FM Guliev the door. The diplomats who conduct Turkey's Caucasus policies must be disappointed," he fulminated. Taha Akyol, in mainstream "Milliyet" April 27, drew attention to Azerbaijan's "distance" from Turkey on the Cyprus issue and accused Aliyev of playing politics by shutting a Turkish mosque.

RETHINKING TURKEY-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS

¶5. (C) The strong affection that Turks and Azerbaijanis feel for each other notwithstanding, the crisis in Turkey-Azerbaijan relations has drawn attention to the overall weakness of their bilateral relations. But it may also prompt the two sides to no longer take each other for granted and to refashion their relations into a genuine strategic partnership. Particularly if done alongside the normalization of Turkey-Armenia relations, such a development would enhance considerably Turkey's capacity to play a positive role in promoting stability and development in the South Caucasus region -- a capacity which is presently limited by Turkey's lack of relations with Armenia and a non-strategic, "national policy" approach toward Azerbaijan.

REGIONAL POLITICAL AND SECURITY AFFAIRS

¶6. (C) High-level visits between Turkish and Azerbaijani officials are frequent, but often appear perfunctory; the

level of consultation should improve and be institutionalized across a wider array of ministries. While the Turks insist that they have consulted Azerbaijan throughout the process of negotiation with Armenia, they have blind-sided their neighbors before. The Caucasus Stability Cooperation Platform (CSCP) idea was rather ham-handedly rolled out at the height of the Russia-Georgia conflict with no apparent consultation with Azerbaijan, much less with Georgia. Our academic and think-tank contacts have emphasized to us the almost complete lack of strategic dialogue they observe between Turkey and Azerbaijan on regional issues, such as Iran and Russia. While Baku, like Turkey, wishes to maintain good relations with Tehran and Moscow, Turkey has more ambitiously pursued good relations with both countries with a seeming indifference to Azerbaijani interests or concerns. Indeed, it was to Moscow the Turks first presented the CSCP idea. The Turks have also depended on -- or taken for granted -- Azerbaijani support on various regional Turkic initiatives, like the Turkic Summit, for which we have not observed particularly strong enthusiasm from Baku (much less from Ashgabat or Tashkent). These initiatives appear to reduce Turkey-Azerbaijan relations to their ethno-linguistic component and subsume bilateral relations to Turkey's regional ambitions. Most tellingly, by closing its border with Armenia in 1993, Turkey effectively sidelined itself on N-K -- Azerbaijan's number one priority. Ironically and perhaps as intended, through the "road map" with Armenia, the Turks may have at least managed to put themselves in the game on N-K, albeit at the short-term cost of annoying the GOAJ tremendously.

TRADE

¶7. (SBU) Turkish exports to Azerbaijan have grown substantially in the past two years; imports from Azerbaijan have also grown, though oil and gas imports are the largest component. But Turkey has no free trade agreement with Azerbaijan, moving instead to facilitate trade through the Economic Cooperation Organization Trade Agreement (ECOTA) -- an initiative to extend most favored trading status across

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the ECO area that has so far not yet been ratified by Azerbaijan (reftel). As a member of the European Customs Union, Turkey requires EU consent for its bilateral FTAs, but has managed to conclude bilateral FTAs with eleven countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans, as well as recently with Georgia. Indeed, the Turks have invested heavily in Georgia and have been busily laying the groundwork for more robust trade and investment.

ENERGY

¶8. (C) Turkey's failure to reach a gas transit agreement with Azerbaijan has been a drag on bilateral relations. The Turkish MFA, we believe, recognizes the strategic imperative of such an agreement, but the Energy Ministry and BOTAS have been focused purely on the economics of the deal. This may be changing. On May 1, Taner Yildiz, an MP from Kayseri, replaced Hilmi Guler as the Energy Minister. Yildiz had long been rumored to be in line for the job and had actively worked on energy issues for over a year under the guise of the PM's personal advisor on energy. As a result, Yildiz is well-briefed on the issues and has displayed an unusually high degree of confidence about reaching an agreement with Azerbaijan. He commented May 6, "Energy will play the role of a catalyst in bringing relations between Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey to a more positive level," and proclaimed that "Turkey and Azerbaijan would agree on a new gas price soon." Within days of assuming office, he sent a BOTAS team to Azerbaijan and will accompany the PM on his trip there May 12-13. Yildiz's tone and eagerness to make progress is refreshing and may reflect new direction and authority granted to him by the PM. It may also reflect a prior

relationship with SOCAR and the government of Azerbaijan that Yildiz has developed over the last six months presiding over several negotiating sessions as an unofficial envoy of the PM. If a breakthrough is achieved, it would not only strengthen the bilateral relationship, it would remove one of the most difficult and long-standing hurdles for the development of an East-West energy corridor. Yildiz, however, may still be overstating his case; in a late March meeting with DAS Bryza, he predicted the energy disagreements between Azerbaijan and Turkey would be solved within a month or two. Since then, no progress has been made.

CIVIL SOCIETY/DEMOCRACY/HUMAN RIGHTS

¶9. (C) Turkey has not promoted democratic institutions and human rights in the South Caucasus. While much is made about the divergence between the GOT and the GOAJ over the former's Islamist leanings, the democratic divergence between the two countries also hinders relations. While not a perfect democrat, Erdogan, like other Turkish civilian leaders before him who have faced party closures and even prison, has a strong devotion to the electoral process. The trends in Azerbaijani democracy are viewed negatively here, yet the GOT steadfastly refuses to involve itself in Azerbaijani domestic affairs. By contrast, in other nations with which Turkey has close, even "fraternal" relations, such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq, the GOT, while taking pains not to appear to be interfering in domestic affairs, balances its relations, talks to and develops ties with opposition politicians and political groups outside the central government, allowing it to speak persuasively on the importance of the democratic process. Turkey appears to have no similar relations with any such figures outside the GOAJ and has done little to reach out to and assist even the organizational capacity of any such groups. Despite a shared language, civil society ties are weak; our contacts complain there is not even a joint Turkey-Azerbaijan think tank or foreign policy publication. There is also little evidence that the two sides are cooperating robustly on a range of important functional issues. For example, Turkey has concluded bilateral cooperation protocols on cooperation on the fight against human trafficking with Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Kyrgyzstan but not with Azerbaijan, despite it being an important source country.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Strengthening the strategic partnership between Turkey and Azerbaijan could have a stabilizing influence in

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the South Caucasus and promote -- particularly if done in concert with normalizing Turkey-Armenia relations -- the Euro-Atlantic integration of the South Caucasus region, which Turkey is well-situated to help advance. Turkey should take advantage of, but not take for granted, its geographical position and cultural and historical ties to Azerbaijan.

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JEFFREY